DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 120 913 EA 008 052

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TITLE Declining Enrollment--A Blessing.
PUB DATE [74]
NOTE 8p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage
DESCRIPTORS *Change Strategies; Community Support; *Consolidated Schools; Educational Administration; Educational Planning; Elementary Secondary Education; *Enrollment Trends; Organizational Change; *Program Descriptions; School Organization; *School Redistricting
IDENTIFIERS *Declining Enrollment; New York (Oyster Bay)

ABSTRACT

This report describes how a New York school district took advantage of a decline in elementary school enrollment to restructure the district's educational program, reduce staff requirements, and eliminate double shifting at the district's junior high and high school. The district's plan involved closing one of the three elementary schools and converting the building into a middle school, thereby freeing the former high school/junior high school building for full-time use as a high school. A concerted effort was made by the board of education and the district administration to win support for the plan (and the bond issue it required) among staff members, students, and the community. The plan was well supported by all segments of the community and, despite some construction delays on the middle school project, was successfully implemented without major difficulty. (JG)

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DECLINING ENROLLMENT - A BLESSING

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EA 008 052

Declining enrollments in the elementary schools plus an innovative plan for reorganizing the schools plus voter approval for some renovations and a small addition to one building made it possible to eliminate double sessions on the junior and senior high school levels in the Oyster Bay - East Norwich Central School District. In the fall of 1967 rising enrollments throughout the district forced double sessions on the junior and senior high school pupils. The senior high school used the former junior-senior high school building in the morning, thereby providing for the use of the same facility by the junior high school in the afternoon. The increases on the elementary level were taken care of by the use of relocatable classrooms.

The Board of Education presented several alternative propositions to the voters involving the purchase of land and the construction of a new secondary facility. All were doomed to defeat. The last vote was held in February 1970. The taxpayers had made it clear that they did not want to face the steadily increasing costs of a new building. It was equally clear to the Board and the Superintendent that some other means would have to be found to eliminate the abbreviated school sessions or everyone would have to learn to live with them.

Soon after the last vote, a trend began to appear in terms of the falling off of elementary enrollments on the pre-kindergarten and kindergarten levels. During the

early stages, the decline only provided some relief on the elementary level. However, study of the trends provided some hope that eventually a plan involving changed patterns of building usage might be possible.

The facilities of the district included one small K - 3 building, three K - 6 buildings and a junior-senior high school building. In addition to these district owned facilities, a church school building was rented for a pre-kindergarten program.

Each year during the month of December, an intensive study of how to house all of the pupils in the next school year was conducted. As many as eight different patterns for utilizing the facilities were tried. However, it was not until late in December of 1972 that things fell into place - the possibilities appeared for a fine educational program and full time education for all students.

On January 2, 1973, the Superintendent presented the following plan to the Board of Education:

1. Establish an Early Childhood Center by placing the pre-kindergarten program and all kindergarten children in the smallest building that was serving as a K - 3 school.
2. Use the two newest elementary buildings for Grades 1 - 5.
3. Discontinue the use of the largest elementary school as an elementary school.
4. Convert the discontinued elementary school which was centrally located in the district and on a large site to a middle school for Grades 6 - 8.

5. Renovate the proposed middle school building and add eight rooms to provide specialized facilities for science, home economics, industrial arts and music.

6. Use the secondary school building for Grades 9 - 12 on a full time schedule.

The plan requiring only a modest construction program would not only eliminate double sessions but would provide other advantages. The wide range of age levels that were being housed together would be divided into more wholesome combinations. New educational programs could be designed to more appropriately meet the needs of the pupils. While it was not our purpose at the outset, we would be able to experience a rather high level of economy because of reduced staff requirements. The movement of all kindergarten children from three locations to a single building and the movement of pupils in Grades 1 - 5 from three schools to two would permit better distribution of pupils on each grade level and still provide highly desirable class sizes.

The proposal was not only viewed through rose colored glasses but was scrutinized very carefully through clear eyes. We looked at the kind of objections that might be raised by the public. We expected serious questions to be raised about increased transportation costs and the bussing of large numbers of very young pupils to the Early Childhood Center. We felt that great concern would be raised about the discontinuance of one elementary building and the reassignment of the pupils. We also felt that there might be some sociological overtones as well as opposition to the spending of any money at all. We knew that we had to develop sound educational programs

for the new units. Parents would have to be involved and well conceived plans for orientation of pupils, parents and staff would be required.

In addition, we knew that our staff had to be fully involved. Apprehension concerning reduction in staff would have to be handled carefully and time would have to be found to do all that was necessary.

Nevertheless, the Board was enthusiastic and set a date for a public meeting on January 16, 1973, at which time the Board and the Superintendent would present the proposal. The Superintendent used an overhead projector and transparencies for the explanation of what was termed a "feasibility study". It had to be called that because of the lack of time in which to prepare detailed answers to all of the questions we wanted to be able to answer.

Approximately seven hundred people showed up to hear about the "inexpensive solution" to the district's big problem. They listened, they questioned and they even applauded. One citizen finally stood up and said, "Let's close the meeting in order that the Board and Administration can go to work and get the rest of the answers."

The Board immediately employed an architect who was well aquainted with our district. We set out to involve our staff. Fortunately, several retirements and leaves of absence eased the problem of staff reduction. The administration and teaching staffs entered in with an exceptionally high level of cooperation and enthusiasm. Study groups and workshops were organized and consultants were hired. Parents were brought into each of the buildings in order that their concerns could be given immediate attention. Students on the upper levels were also brought into the planning.

On March 13, 1973, a second public meeting was held. A price tag of $800,000 was available for the renovations and construction. It was explained that the savings resulting from the reduction in the number of hours that buses were operating because of double sessions would offset the cost of transporting more pupils. An estimate of the savings resulting from staff reductions was also presented. A timetable for the renovations and the construction of the addition was given. It was clearly explained that the addition could not be ready for the opening of school but if the enlargement of the Cafeteria-General Purpose Room was ready we could function on a temporary basis. The public was unanimous in urging that we put the plan into operation in September with the known potential hardships and the work still to be completed on the educational program.

On March 28, 1973, the voters overwhelmingly approved the bond issue. Working drawings and bid specifications were prepared. When the bids came in so did our first major problem - we were short by $100,000. The Board decided to ask the voters for the additional funds which were approved.

Our next delay was on the delivery of steel for the sorely needed Cafeteria-General Purpose Room. We were falling behind on our schedule but we had passed the point of no return. Knowing that we could not have the Cafeteria-General Purpose Room until October, the Superintendent recommended the renting of a large tent (the kind used for outdoor receptions). The Board approved and the middle school opened with great enthusiasm for lunch and classes in the tent. In fact, the tent diverted attention from the daily hardships with comments being made in the community

about how great school was in the tent. Of course, the tent did not provide a picnic for the administrative and teaching staff but they did a tremendous job of maintaining an outstanding level of education. Mother Nature also helped by providing an almost rain-free fall season.

Other shortages have plagued the project but the renovations were eventually completed one after another and full occupancy of the addition is expected in March. The year has been a hectic one for the middle school but the other units - the Early Childhood Center, the elementary schools and the senior high schools have moved along extremely well. It is generally agreed that the advantages gained for the students have far outweighed the inconveniences.

The district is well along in its development of new and better educational programs. Facilities and programs are geared to the age levels they serve. Three units - the Early Childhood Center, the middle school and the senior high school - serve pupils on a district-wide basis. A more wholesome distribution of pupils has resulted in the elementary schools. Economies have been realized from the more efficient use of space, equipment and staff, and last but not least, the community is much more united because the divisiveness caused by many unsuccessful bond issues to solve double sessions has been eliminated.

Declining enrollments leading to the closing of schools are causing serious problems in many communities. On the contrary, the reduced number of pupils has been a blessing to our district. We hope that our experience might help others to find positive ways out of what, at first, might appear to be a dilemma.

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